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Testing to begin at DuSable Park

*While Kerr-McGee officials ready their instruments,
Park District officials and activists hash out ideas*

By LYDIALYLE GIBSON

Staff Writer

One of these days, DuSable Park—dedicated 15 years ago by the late Mayor Harold Washington—will actually become a park. Manicured grass and gardens will replace the existing forest of weeds and wildflowers, and a few tons of new dirt may replace the soil where Park District officials suspect radioactive thorium is lurking. There'll be a statue to honor the city's polyglot founder—born to African and French parents, Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable came to this continent from Haiti, and once he got here, took a Potawatomie wife—and perhaps a fieldhouse or watercraft dock.

But first, officials from Kerr-McGee,

the Oklahoma-based energy company that's inherited the burden of finding and cleaning any thorium, have to get out on the three-acre site with a few soil-testing kits. Until the extent of the contamination is known and then removed, plans for the park's development can be nothing more than conceptual. According to Mike Joyce, a community liaison for the Environmental Protection Agency, Kerr-McGee ought to show up in the next couple of weeks.

"They've submitted a work plan," Joyce said. "But there's no hard date. We expect to see them out there in the next two weeks."

Meanwhile, roughly 80 DuSable Park boosters eager to get the show on the road turned out for a symposium at South Michigan's Chicago Architecture

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DuSable Park a pricey project

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Foundation last Thursday to cheer du Sable's legacy, ponder the future of his park, and wonder out loud just what the holdup is. Following a half-hour presentation by artist Laurie Palmer of a handful of the 60-some proposals from across the globe and across the city that became part of her exhibit *Three Acres on the Lake*, DuSable League historian Virginia Julien read from her 1972 master's thesis on the city's founder. Calling herself "absolutely fascinated with the man," Julien held forth on his various virtues of character and skill.

"He was the black root from which all our glory was drawn," Julien said.

Grant Park Advisory Council President Bob O'Neill expressed bafflement that a site so well situated beside Loop prosperity, Millennium Park, and a nucleus for tourism would be allowed to languish so long. City officials should seize the opportunity, he said, for "an incredibly regarded international park."

"What's interesting to me about the park is its position," O'Neill said. "It's the only lakefront property not developed ... Now it's a pile of weeds and wildflowers and mounds of contaminated soil. Right next to Navy Pier. The time is very right to do this and it's very important to honor du Sable. We really should get moving on this."

Dan Purciarello, a Park District project manager and 26-year veteran of the department, offered a little more cautious enthusiasm. Noting that Park District hands are tied until the site is clean, Purciarello reminded the gathering of DuSable Park's other complications, too. Mostly, he said, it's hard to reach.

"This is one of those jobs you really want to work on, but you're also confounded by the challenges," Purciarello said. "The park is very difficult to

access. There are environmental issues. There's a lot of fill there, and we don't really know where it came from. The only access is under Lake Shore Drive, which is a gloomy way to enter a park. The Park District shares your sentiment, but it's very expensive to develop a park like this."

Purciarello put the price tag at \$5 million or so, suggesting that such financial demands might require some private funding on top of Park District resources.

"That's a lot of money," he said. "This is a site that has such potential to bring people together. But we're confronted with some realities here that are very challenging."

Susan Urbas, president of the Chicago River Rowing and Paddling Center and an environmental lawyer, turned out to pitch her group's proposal—part of *Three Acres on the Lake*—for a boathouse and dock on the park.

"We're talking about actually putting people on the water, managed, controlled access to the water," Urbas said. "We're particularly thinking of children coming down there and learning about du Sable in the building and the statue, and then they can come out and see the city that came up from the seed this man planted, and then we can put them on the water."

Like others at last week's symposium, Urbas placed the burden of getting the thorium out of the park, and promptly, too, squarely on the shoulders of the EPA. Exonerating Park District officials by explaining they could be slapped with the cleanup duty should they do much more than twitch, Urbas said it was the EPA that seemed "reluctant."

"Whatever it is we decided to do, what's holding everything up is the perception that there is thorium out there," Urbas said. "We don't know how deep it is, whether it's moving around on the site, whether it's leeching into the lake, or how expensive it is to do any-

thing. If it's deep, the EPA might have to move a lot of soil, to the tune of \$10 million or \$15 million."

"It's a very slow process," Urbas said. "We'd like to see the planning start in 2002 or 2003, but we can't really do that and the Park District can't get involved until this is characterized ... The EPA needs to be led to the water to realize this is a real priority."

In an interview Friday, Joyce explained a few of the complexities involved in getting DuSable Park tested and scrubbed. Since they don't own the site and didn't directly contaminate it—the thorium's true source is a long-defunct incandescent lamp company called Lindsay Light Chemical Company—Kerr-McGee isn't automatically responsible for cleaning DuSable Park. In fact, Joyce said, were the Park District not a public body, that task would certainly fall to its officials.

"Everyone points fingers at everyone else," Joyce said. "Kerr-McGee is kind of going an extra step by agreeing to test the site and remove the contamination as it's found. Usually they don't do this testing. In all other cases, it's the developer or owner ... If the Park District was a private entity, there'd be no question."

"Kerr-McGee has been saying they've been going along with this, but they could fight this heavily," Joyce said. "That's what we're trying to avoid—there are big entities involved, and this could litigate forever. We're trying not to fall into the litigation trap. The Lindsay Light team, all of us, would love to see a park there. There's nothing to our advantage not to prod this thing along."

And so, Joyce said, Kerr-McGee should be onsite within a fortnight. The testing itself can be "tricky," too, Joyce said, because the instruments can only measure two feet down from the surface. That means a lot of digging, and a lot of time, according to Joyce.

"But at least it's progress," he said. "Somebody's doing it."



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